

CSU Advocacy Centre Annual Report 2020-2021

(see separate excel sheet for stats)

This was the first academic year that the Advocacy Centre operated fully remotely. Services were online for all of Summer 2020, Fall 2020 and Winter 2021 semesters.

Student advocates were hired and trained remotely this year as well.

This year saw the largest number of consults, for both cases and inquiries.

The new CRM, which helps track cases, only went live on June 15th, 2020. Therefore, the first 3 months of the pandemic, between March and June 2020, it was very challenging to track cases as the CSU Advocacy Centre was completely decentralised and we no longer had physical files. This also slowed down operations as the administrative assistants had an increased workload constantly checking in and following-up with all staff to track what cases were opened and which were closed. Being decentralised also meant that the Advocacy Centre began to operate almost exclusively via appointments only, unless information could be given right away to a student. This better allowed student advocates to have room for follow-ups with students they were already assisting and time to make necessary calls and e-mails to university departments they were trying to reach on behalf of the student.

The Advocacy Centre obviously then also had to train new staff fully remotely in the Summer of 2020.

Given that operating remotely was slower, more student advocates were hired so that students' cases would not drag on unnecessarily long on the advocate end.

When it became clear that operations were not going to resume in-person any time soon, even when the new CRM went live, the administrative assistants continued triaging consults that would come in, especially, via e-mail, to either gather a certain minimum amount of information that would allow a student advocate to help a student more effectively in the first appointment, otherwise too many follow-ups would be required with the student advocate just to get all the documents to understand a student's situation which would then decrease the amount of time each student advocate was spending actually helping students because of gathering information still.

There were 183 inquiries in Spring 2020 (Summer I semester 2020) (that did not become cases). These were very hard to track and, unfortunately, not much was able to be done to assist these students either in the time constraints they had or with the little information they provided or also because their concerns were not about their individual situation but about the university's decisions during the pandemic in general (such as the demand for PASS options and tuition reduction). These inquiries are forwarded to the CSU as they are university-wide issues/impacts.

This year saw the same number of cases (335) as the year when the Concordia University run Student Advocacy Office (SAO) was short-staffed and going through change in management (336). Both services were likely saturated this year due to the pandemic. The Advocacy Centre, on top of the 335 cases, had 438 inquiries, of which 183 were in the short span of the first 6 weeks of the Summer 2020 semester when the effects and restrictions of the pandemic were first felt.

Student advocates first listen to the issues that a particular student presents them with, checks in with the student to make sure that there are not potentially other significant variables that could be impacting the issue brought forward and then present possible options of how the student might proceed to resolve their issue. Where necessary, the student advocate researches further options if the case is very particular on behalf of the student. If the student then wishes to proceed with an option presented to them by a student advocate, the student advocate then helps them compile the work for their case within the whatever necessary deadlines are noted. A case is closed when the issue is deemed resolved, terminated (in that the

student exhausted all the options they were willing to) or if a student ceases to reach out or respond to their student advocate. Cases are reopened when necessary.

However, in some cases, the Advocacy Centre either does not have sufficient information to assist a student in depth (eg. Phone number, availabilities for an appointment, context) so they will be given general information, as helpful as possible given whatever the student has shared, but may not meet with a student advocate. These consults are instead logged as inquiries and not cases in our records. The Advocacy Centre recorded **438** inquiries and **335** cases for a total of **773** consults this academic year.

Before the pandemic, students would first visit us in person so information gathering was always very thorough on the first encounter. Most students now contact us via e-mail. Though we request a phone number of to reach them on to better understand their situation in case there is insufficient information in their e-mail, some students are unable to e-mail back within a timeframe that makes sense to be able to resolve their situation which itself may be time-sensitive.

The Advocacy Centre can be reached via phone as staff have the university's FortiClient VPN and Cisco Jabber software to answer the Advocacy Centre 7313 CSU office extension. Voice messages are checked every working day.

Since operations and cases take more time during the pandemic because of delays and restrictions, student advocates have an increased workload per case (many more follow-ups required to make sure a student's case gets addressed in a timely manner). This makes meeting with students on a same day they contact the Advocacy Centre more challenging as their days are now very scheduled with meetings in advance.

When this became apparent during Summer 2020, the CSU agreed to hire more student advocates to ease the workload and have more student advocates available to assist students as promptly as possible. This meant more appointments available to students within 48 hours of their initial contact with the Advocacy Centre

provided students gave their availabilities when asked, contact information to be reached on and context of their situation so that they could be scheduled with an appropriate student advocate (eg. Graduate students meeting with the graduate student advocate where possible, or complicated cases going to a student advocate who works more hours or to a more experienced advocate in the case of Hearings and Code of Rights and Responsibilities cases) to avoid further delays if having to reschedule and start over with another student advocate if not suitable.

When the number of consults remained high even at the end of the academic year and when Summer 2021 semester continued online at the start of the new academic year, the CSU had to increase staff hours in Summer 2021, despite budget restrictions for the Advocacy Centre in order not to turn away students requesting assistance who had provided sufficient information regarding their situation. May 2021 for example saw 111 consults in a single month of which 80 became cases (for comparison, 80 is close to the number of cases the Advocacy Centre was recording per semester before the pandemic).

These extra hours, however, were only implemented in the Summer 2021 Semester which is the 2021-2022 academic year.

In the 2020-2021 academic year, the CSU hired more student advocates, but two (2) resigned before the end of the academic year and the remaining staff took on extra hours in Winter 2021. There were also a large number of Hearings in Winter 2021, which eat up a lot of the Advocacy Centre time, so case numbers were lower in Winter 2021, but workload was very much still high.

The Advocacy Centre would like to also be able to do more broad research and analysis that it has been unable to do because of the number of consults. The effects of the pandemic are still ongoing and many more students are now aware of the Advocacy Centre, given the number of inquiries, so students will likely continue to consult the Advocacy Centre after the pandemic. Therefore, any efforts in continued outreach must be met with a continued ability to adequately serve students. For 2 years now, the Advocacy Centre case numbers have been at a saturation point and the number of inquiries from students who do not even meet

with a student advocate is still very high, showing more need for immediate assistance not just scheduled assistance which the Advocacy Centre, at saturation point, cannot satisfy. Despite this, students are still reporting having not heard of the Advocacy Centre until after their problem has become a bigger issue and many students are still going to academic misconduct interviews without first consulting a student advocate.

UPDATES THIS YEAR

The Academic Code of Conduct was expected to go under review in 2020, however the Covid-19 pandemic and campus being shutdown in March 2020 has put this on hold last academic year and this academic year also. The CSU is actively waiting for the University to confirm how and when the review will take place in 2022.

The new Client Relationship Manager (CRM) that the CSU had built for the CSU Services went live on June 15th, 2020. Given the fully online, remote operations and the Advocacy Centre being otherwise decentralised, the CRM has been essential in being able to functionally and easily track all cases and enquiries.

At the end of the Winter 2021 semester, the Advocacy Centre joined the Academic Integrity Subcommittee for Concordia's Advisory Committee on Teaching and Learning (ACTL). The Subcommittee's mandate is to 'propose a university-wide strategy and plan of action that will contribute to inform undergraduate students about the Academic Code of Conduct and the consequences for breaking the Code'.

Further Anticipated Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Advocacy Centre Operations

CSU part-time staff are also students, therefore, working on-campus if classes are online and remote becomes challenging.

In-person operations depend on Concordia's on-campus health and safety restrictions which for now do not allow for unscheduled appointments or walk-ins, even staff are approved for working on-site.

CASE LOAD ANALYSIS

Case numbers and Inquiry numbers were high throughout the pandemic.

GSA cases (graduate students) nearly doubled since last year from 40 to 76.

Academic misconduct cases increased the most, from 73 last year to 124.

There is also an increased number of cases going to Hearing. Hearings are the longest case type, and can take over a year to fully resolve and close, so many of those cases if opened in Winter 2021 will still be open and being worked on throughout the next 2021-2022 academic year.

School of Graduate Studies (SGS) and the Faculty of Arts & Science (FAS) both hired extra Code Administrators so as not fall behind dealing with high volumes of academic misconduct cases.

PROJECT

It took most of the 2019-2020 academic year, but the CSU completed building the new Client Relationship Manager (CRM) for the CSU Services: LIC, HOJO and the Advocacy Centre.

The new CRM went live on June 15th, 2020.

Staff were trained to use the new CRM correctly and to also report bugs and issues as given the very recent build, there is still a lot of troubleshooting.

It took almost a year because of the case workload to transfer all the old cases manually from the old CRM the new one. Unfortunately, given the old CRM's

restrictions, which was part of the reason the CSU had a new one built, the data was very hard to extract and archive en masse. So for about 1 hour a week, during less busy times of the day and week when there are less calls, staff were uploading the old cases to the new CRM throughout this past academic year. Now all cases can be searched for precedence which is important given high staff turnover at the Advocacy Centre.

ABOUT THE ADVOCACY CENTRE

Mission

The Advocacy Centre's Mission is to help sure students understand Concordia University's policies, regulations and procedures and are informed on what options they have if they encounter any obstacles regarding these. The Advocacy Center is dedicated to assisting students in the resolution of conflicts arising from actions or decisions taken by the University.

Vision

The Advocacy Centre aims to be an easy-to-access, professional and knowledgeable drop-in and consultation resource for all matters directly related to the university and its procedure *as they pertain to students*. We seek to continuously expand our reach and how we can assist students and equip them with the information and options they need to best serve them.

Values

- Professionalism;
- Accessibility;
- Representing and assisting students from all spectrums, backgrounds;

-Being Informed: keeping up to date on university policies and regulations that affect students and researching less-known/typical ones when they are brought to our attention by students;

-Respect (The Advocacy Centre will never tolerate any form of verbal or physical abuse of its advocates by anyone) and ensures absolute professionalism when advocates interact with students

WHO WE ARE

The CSU

The CSU's mission is to serve students, defend their rights, and act as their highest representative body at Concordia. Two things are essential: that we are beholden to our membership, and that our funds are used responsibly.

The Advocacy Centre

The Advocacy Centre is a service provided by the Concordia Student Union (CSU) to support students through obstacles encountered to their academic endeavours.

The CSU Advocacy Centre believes that students should be informed, empowered and supported in exercising their rights both in and beyond their academic environments. We are here to provide assistance to students who feel that they have been treated unfairly on campus or to help students by informing them of University policies that impact both their academic and non-academic pursuits on campus.

In addition, the Centre provides representation services to students as defined under the Academic Code of Conduct or the Code of Rights and Responsibilities. Advocates are here to listen to students and to address their concerns in a proactive manner.

Other services include a free Commissioner for Oaths for undergraduate students (and very affordable for non-undergraduate students), academic information sessions, general consultations and referrals.

The Advocacy Centre team is comprised of the Advocacy Centre Manager, the Advocacy Administrative Assistants and the Student Advocacy Assistants (student advocates). The administrative assistants and the students advocates are full-time students trained by the Advocacy Centre Manager in the services that the Advocacy Centre offers.

WHAT WE DO

If a student is experiencing a problem as a result of the universities policies, regulations and procedures and come see us, we assist and where applicable accompany them in resolving the issue within the most relevant and suitable means available.

This is a very basic structure of how student advocates interact with students. The level and duration of interactions and cases is determined by the nature, urgency and magnitude of a student's case.

The Advocacy Centre used to categorise its registered cases into six fields: 1) Academic Misconduct, 2) Code of Rights and Responsibilities, 3) Tribunal Hearings, 4) Student Requests, 5) Readmission and 6) Complaints and General Consultations.

As of the 2019-2020 academic, the Advocacy Centre categorises its registered cases into these following six (6) fields: 1) Academic Misconduct, 2) Code of Rights and Responsibilities, 3) Tribunal Hearings, 4) Student Requests, 5) Complaints and 6) General Consultations. There is also a seventh (7th) rare, but necessary category since the new CRM was built, for cases that cross over multiple distinct categories, called Complex Consult, to better separate from the General Consultations that

can take long because time is being taken trying to determine which university department can resolve a situation to the Consultations that take long because there is simply distinct new problem after distinct new problem being solved, and the length of the case is not due to research but the student's situation.

The Advocacy Centre registers a case and opens an official case file for a student when a student completes an intake form and their case requires follow-up – case work to be done without the student needing to be present, but whose results will inform their next steps and decisions taken in their case. For this reason, Commissioner for Oaths clients and some Walk-In clients are not counted in our registered cases.

Academic Misconduct

This category refers to charges relating to offences listed in the Academic Code of Conduct. Advocates evaluate the alleged charges and develop case strategies with the student. They provide information and guidance throughout the process, as well as representation at interviews and hearings for cases falling under the Code.

About a quarter of the Centre's cases are related to Academic Misconduct.

Code of Rights and Responsibilities

This category refers to cases in which a student has been alleged to violate the Code of Rights and Responsibilities (CoRR) or cases in which a student would like to charge a member of the university for violating the CoRR. This Code outlines the processes for dealing with cases of harassment, discrimination and sexual violence, among others. Given the seriousness of the infractions, the possible sanctions as stated in the CoRR can include suspension and expulsion. Furthermore, only student advocates with experience in handling long and serious cases can take on these cases alone. It is one of the more demanding aspects of our mandate and cases usually last many months.

Tribunal Hearings

We assist and represent students facing disciplinary action by the university for serious academic misconduct or involved in high-level complaints against members of the Concordia community. Though these cases are few compared to the other types of cases, they are the most demanding and intricate cases our office sees. Both Academic Code of Conduct and Code of Rights and Responsibilities cases can end up going to a hearing, but not all do and the preparation and work on a case is different based on whether it does or not. Typically a case goes to a Hearing if previous steps were not successful in resolving the issue. Hearings require very lengthy and thorough preparation.

Student Requests

This category refers to official requests to the university by students for special cases and needs. The Centre informs students about the various regulations dealing with such cases, helps with the construction of student requests, evaluates options available in various cases and advocates on behalf of the student.

The complexity of the case may in some cases be due to the serious impacts of the decision (e.g. failing grade, loss of visa or expulsion). Other times it may be a case that requires contact with several offices at the university. This case type varies the most in length, from as little as 2 weeks to as long as a year depending, for example, if a decision on a student request is being appealed or if other avenues are being initiated as a result of a rejection.

Complaints

This category refers to all forms of complaints involving students and other members of the Concordia community. Advocates help students file complaints or defend themselves against accusations that do not fall under the Academic Code of Conduct or Code of Rights and Responsibilities. A case is recorded as a complaint if during consultations with the Advocacy Centre and after being presented options, the student chooses to address their complaint with the university (i.e. a case is not recorded as a complaint if the student is complaining about something, but elects to do X to resolve the situation and move on).

General Consultations

The Advocacy Centre is a significant resource for students who are confused about how to maneuver within the bureaucracy of Concordia University or students who would simply like to inform themselves about their rights and responsibilities as a member of the Concordia community. Typically, these are Walk-Ins that become cases because of the amount of research the student advocate has to do and the amount of different departments the student advocate has to contact before getting a final and clear answer.

Before-the-Fact vs. After-the-Fact Cases

While the Centre is there to provide support when difficult situations arise, we also place emphasis on prevention as an important component in safeguarding student rights. Student advocates are available to answer students' questions and to explore possible solutions before a given situation escalates. If one is unsure about the Code or about how to approach an issue within their department that is impeding their academic, we urge them to come and see a student advocate. Services provided at the Centre are confidential and it is our mission to provide relevant and timely solutions in a non-judgmental and supportive environment.

After-the-Fact Cases – cases in which students have taken all of the measures they are aware of and have had decisions made by the university regarding their situation all before ever meeting with a student advocate – are the trickiest cases to handle because some university decisions cannot be appealed. This is why we strongly recommend students come see us even for an informal consultation if they do not want to register their case with us before submitting student requests or requesting certain exceptions they have high stakes in.